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Nice, But Not Necessary: An Examination of Narrative in Horror Games

Jey Moriconi

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

Corey Creekmur
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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
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Videogames as an artistic medium have made incredible strides in the last ten years. With the inclusion of quick time events, decision-driven gameplay, and more recently, the production of virtual reality consoles, developers have sought to integrate narrative and gameplay in ways that were previously unexplored. Despite this, the idea of narrative being "nice, but not necessary," has prevailed in the videogame community since the popularization of gaming in the 1970s. This thesis argues for an approach that analyzes narrative and gameplay equally, termed "ludonarrative," and examines the function of narrative in videogames, particularly those in the horror genre.

Part One will examine the prevailing fields of videogame study and propose another method for analyzing games. It will also argue for a new way of discussing the relationship between gameplay and narrative, while deconstructing Gonzola Frasca's model of simulation and determining what the essence of narrative is in a videogame. The primary goal of this section is to restructure the argument between ludologists and narratologists, gameplay and narrative.

Part Two explore the ways in which the player creates and interacts with narrative through choice, consequence, and rewards, while observing the way in which the developers create the narrative in a way that allows it to be manipulated by the players. The videogames analyzed will be those that have positively affected the videogame community through their combined ingenuity of gameplay and narrative, namely *Limbo, Soma, Resident Evil 7, Amnesia, Undertale, Until Dawn, The Last of Us, Silent Hill PT, Five Nights at Freddy's,* and *Loved.*

Part Two will also offer a psychoanalytic analysis of horror game narrative in relation to the player, through the concept of parallelism. This section will combine theories from Freud's *The Uncanny* and Carl Young's "Shadow," as well as videogame critics James Portnow and John Bain. The primary goal of this section is to address the unique nature of the narrative in horror games, as opposed to other games, and the double consciousness of the players who engage in them.

It is the goal of this thesis to encourage publishers, developers, and the gaming industry as a whole to consider narrative designers as something more than "nice." Narrative is an integral part of every game, especially horror games, and dismissing its importance will limit the videogame medium from reaching its full artistic potential.

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Introduction

The only me is me. Are you sure the only you is you?

--Silent Hills P.T.

In August 2014, Kojima Productions, under the pseudonym "7780s Studio," released a playable teaser (PT) for the unfinished game *Silent Hills*—the next psychological horror installment in the *Silent Hill* franchise. Unlike its predecessors, the PT was first person, and followed an unnamed protagonist as they looped through the same hallway, which changed slightly after each iteration. The player was charged with solving puzzles and listening to the eerie bits of story streaming out of a radio, all the while being haunted by a female apparition. The teaser was met with overwhelming praise, and some critics have called it "the purest horror game around," (Houghton). So how do horror games work, and what makes for excellent horror?

This thesis seeks to understand how narrative operates in relation to videogames, particularly those in the horror genre. Using theories from critics John Bain and James Portnow, as well as theoretical models (which detail on a more technical level how narrative works in videogames) from scholars Gonzola Frasca and Henry Jenkins, I investigate the relationship between games, horror, and the self.

Horror is a deeply complicated phenomenon that has been explored for hundreds of years, and defined by dozens of scholars. The definition of horror that I will be using for the remainder of this thesis comes from videogame scholar James Portnow, as I feel that his definition succinctly characterizes what horror is from the perspective of a prominent videogame critic and developer:

> Horror is about the irrational, and the breakdown of logic and the fundamental order of the world. It's about helplessness, and about facing things so much greater than ourselves that, for all of our self-importance and assurance of our place in the universe, we are nothing before them (Portnow 2013).

Portnow's definition applies two fundamental aspects of videogames: logic and challenge. Games are created using engines, in which developers write the code and the engine applies the code. When we play a game, we are taught the logic of the game—what button opens doors, what items we may operate, etc. When a game sets up this logic and then changes it, we are horrified.

The "challenge" is the obstacle we must overcome as players, and sometimes, as people. Let us use the example of *Missile Command*. In the game, nuclear war has broken out, and six cities are being targeted by an endless onslaught of missiles. Your mission is to protect these cities, but inevitably you will fail. There is no way to "beat" *Missile Command*, just as there is no way to "beat" nuclear war. (The reason for playing may be simply to see how long we can last, similar to cell phone apps like *Flappy Bird* that have no end.) The challenge that the videogame poses is unable to be overcome, and we are horrified not because we couldn't finish the game, but because it is impossible to save anyone. It is difficult to have a game prey on helplessness and the irrational effectively, but *Silent Hills* PT managed to do exactly that, and it shook the gaming industry at its core.

In the years leading up to the PT, the horror genre was having something of an identity crisis. Gaming publishers wanted to continue beloved horror series that had begun in the 90s, such as *Resident Evil*, *Wolfenstein*, and *Alone in the Dark*, while at the same time making a profit and appealing to the widest audience (Portnow 2014). The resulting games were an

amalgamation of action, adventure, and frightening looking creatures that needed to be eliminated. The sense of mystery and helplessness found in games like *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, *Clock Tower*, and *System Shock 2*, was completely absent from more recent titles. In order to make things "scary," developers simply made gruesome looking monsters (bloody, missing limbs) that jumped out at the player. Even in games like *Bioshock* or *The Last of Us* that feature haunting atmospheres and captivating stories, the player is given an arsenal of weapons and supplies to overcome the enemies, so the fear is never really tangible. However, not all games followed this action/horror trend.

Amnesia: The Dark Descent made players rely on their wits instead of their guns, by solving puzzles, sneaking around an abandoned castle, and preventing the protagonist from slipping into insanity. *Slender: The Eight Pages* also returned to this sense of helplessness. Players had to navigate a dark forest, looking for eight pages and avoiding the Slender Man, using only a flashlight. Both *Amnesia* and *Slender* changed the genre of survival horror, tipping the scale from action back to horror. Moreover, they spawned a slew of first person "walking simulators" that focused more on avoiding monsters than confronting them. But the *Silent Hills* PT did more for the genre than either of these games combined: it reminded players and developers that horror is about human psychology.

Horror isn't about how moody the atmosphere is, or how grotesque the enemies are. It's about making players feel helpless; it's about making them doubt their own eyes. Most horror games are about evading or defeating the horror. P.T. forced players to work through the horror and examine it from every angle. Because the game is a cyclical hallway, there is no escape, and every change to the environment becomes magnified, making the fear slow, subtle, and effective. Critic David Houghton writes," Its repeating, rhythmically iterating structure focuses the senses

on each and every change in scenario and atmosphere, making even the smallest difference alien, significant, and desperately ominous. Every time you leave is a monumental relief, and every simultaneous instance of returning is a moment of primal foreboding at how things might, and almost certainly will, escalate…"

PT plays on the horrors lurking in the human mind. At the beginning of the game, the player wakes up to see "Watch out. The gap in the door... it's a separate reality. The only me is me. Are you sure the only you is you?" Later, a bloody paper bag repeats these words. The question posed is an existential one, and poses a far greater threat than ghosts, goblins, or zombies. External threats are gone once the monster is. However, psychological fear lingers on, even if the player has "won" the game.

Videogames are capable of incredible things. Just as literature allows us to understand a person in a way that we never could in reality, videogames allow us to experience the parts of ourselves that we rarely acknowledge. The *Silent Hills* PT forces the player to stare directly down the Uncanny Valley (the collection of things resembling humans, but strangely different, like wax dolls and mannequins) and then walk into it, touch it, interact with it. Portnow says that "As an interactive medium, videogames are perhaps the best medium ever created for experiencing simulated scenarios of dread," (2012). Likewise, videogames are one the best and most unique mediums for telling stories. Ewan Kirland argues that the genre of survival horror has an intrinsic relationship to storytelling. "Survival horror is a genre whose very labeling suggests aspects of narrative and story," (Kirkland 62). It is my mission to explore these aspects, to peer deep into the human psyche and ask: Why do we crave narrative in horror games? How does it function? Why do other genres of gaming, like role-playing and adventure, borrow from

horror so much? What are the challenges of integrating narrative and gameplay to create a terrifying experience?

Are you sure the only you is you?

Introduction 2: The Essence of a Videogame

What is a videogame? is a question that has plagued scholars, developers, and players alike. For years, the gaming community has been grappling with this question and it seems that every scholar has come up with their own definition, without necessarily coming to a consensus.

Gonzola Frasca attempts to define video games in relation to the traditional understanding of play and games. Provided that play is defined as," (What is done for) amusement; recreation" and game as a," form of play, especially with rules," he argues that, "*Games* have a result: they define a winner and a loser; *plays* do not." While both play and games are governed by rules, games have clear objectives. However, this definition is problematic, as the "objective" Frasca mentions is unclear. For instance, what is the objective of a game like *Dear Esther,* in which the "point" of the game is to experience the story. Is the objective to complete the story?

Some scholars argue that games may be designed to communicate stories. Nicolas Esposito claims that, "A videogame is a game which we play thanks to an audiovisual apparatus and that can be based on a story," (2005). This definition does not account for the text-based games that emerged in the 1970s like *Adventure* and *Zork,* in which the player navigated through the game by reading and selecting text prompts, rather than reacting to images or graphics. Moreover, as Esposito suggests, not all videogames seek to tell a story. Henry Jenkins writes," The experience of playing a game cannot be reduced to the experience of a story," (3). If we claim that games exist to tell stories in the way that literature or cinema does, we limit the capability of games and ignores the unique qualities (namely interactivity) that distinguish videogames from other forms of media and art.

The above definitions seek to categorize videogames in relation to what they are not, or how they differ from traditional games and other forms of media. Neither attempts to define videogames based on how they operate in relation to the player. As Frasca emphasizes, "videogames are, first and foremost, games." Games exist to be played, and this play component should have a crucial role in our definition of videogames.

Game scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman write, "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome," (11). They continue by identifying four aspects unique to videogames: immediate but narrow interactivity, information manipulation, automated complex systems, and networked communication. Unfortunately, these factors are not only vague and confusing, but some of them, liked networked communication, do not strictly apply to videogames.

We return to the question: what is the essence of a videogame? John Bain (commonly known as TotalBiscuit) provides perhaps the most sufficient answer. In a video titled "What's in a game? A discussion of gameplay and narrative," he says:

> I feel that a game must have an end goal—it must have an objective. But that's not enough. …you must be tested. Games are a challenge of some description. They don't have to be an extreme challenge…but they must be a challenge which you can overcome. *Dear Esther* is not a game; it is a virtual installation. It is something that you tour through. I feel that if you want to be a game as opposed to a virtual installation… you have to have some characteristics…One of those is the notion of a failure state. *Dear Esther* does not have a failure state. The only failure that can occur in that game is the failure to finish it (2013).

The “failure state” that Bain refers to is the possibility of failing to complete a certain objective, whether that results in having to redo the section of gameplay, or missing parts of the story that would have been encountered otherwise. In the game *Until Dawn*, failure to press the buttons in the correct order at a given time can result in character death and an entirely different ending to the game.

The failure state is necessarily unique to videogames, as it has been explored in literature as well. These books, which started being published in the 1970s, referred to as “Choose Your Own Adventure,” and feature multiple avenues which the reader may explore. The failure state in this case is the failure to achieve the desired ending. Some have referred to Choose Your Own Adventure books as “gamebooks,” due to their similarity to games, in which the reader is not only given the agency to shape the outcome of the story, but is often a character in the story itself. By John Bain’s definition of videogames, these books would be considered games, as they incorporate challenge, objectives, and a failure state. Therefore, in order to identify the essence of what a videogame is, we must modify Bain’s definition slightly.

A videogame must have five factors.

1. Objectives.
2. Challenge.
3. A failure state.
4. Digitally accessible.
5. Gameplay.

The failure state depends heavily on challenge and objectives. The objectives allow the failure state to exist; without a desirable goal, there can be no failure to reach the goal. Challenge creates the possibility in which the goal is not reached. If a game lacks any

challenge, then the player can achieve the objective every time. Games like *Dear Esther* pose objectives, but no challenge, and therefore the failure state cannot exist.

In regards to being digitally accessible, it is important to distinguish videogames from other mediums while accurately accounting for how they have changed in the last few years. With the advent of virtual reality consoles like the Oculus Rift and the Vive that do not utilize a standard screen, it is incorrect to claim that a videogame is, "played by means of images on a video screen," as *Merriam Webster* does (it can be, but that is not the defining feature of a videogame). Moreover, it is inaccurate to claim that they must rely on an "audiovisual apparatus," as text-based videogames incorporate little to no visuals (unless the textual characters are considered visuals, but by this definition, literature would also be a visual medium). It is fair to say that videogames must be accessed through digital means, whether through a screen or a headset.

Gameplay is the fifth and final component. Richard Rouse writes that," A game's gameplay is the degree and nature of the interactivity that the game includes." Gameplay is also referred to as game mechanics, and both describe a means by which the player interacts with or *plays* the game. As Frasca explains, all games are inherently tied to the idea of play. It is why those who participate in a game are referred to as "players." If a videogame cannot be played, it is not a game—it is a video.

Using these five factors, we may begin to accurately analyze how a game functions and how it functions in relation to narrative. But in order to do this, it is imperative to identify the prevailing methods of videogame analysis.

Ch. 1 Ludology, Narratology, and the Middle Path of LudoNarrative

"One chilly winter day, as you leafed through your mail, a simple pamphlet caught your eye. 'New Farmers Wanted! Join us and help Oak Tree Town grow as you work the land! Wouldn't it be interesting to become a farmer? To leave the city behind and live off the land, in harmony with nature? With visions of green pastures and friendly animals in your head, you filled out and submitted the application."

These lines mark the opening of the videogame *Story of Seasons*, a farming simulator published by Marvelous in 2015. You (the player) have decided to leave the city to pursue a life of farming, which includes growing crops, raising animals, fishing, mining for gems, competing in festivals, and befriending the locals by giving gifts and talking to them each day. However, not all of these activities are available from the beginning. Mining is only available from Fall of Year 1 (the game is divided into four months, one for each season) and some crops, like rice, are only available after winning challenges against fellow farmers. However, the gameplay is not the only aspect of *Story of Seasons* blocked off.

Important plot points in *Story of Seasons* are unable to be witnessed unless certain conditions are met, meaning that players must "grind" or repeat the same game mechanics until the scene is unlocked. For instance, a key feature of *Story of Seasons* is marrying a bachelor or bachelorette. If the player wants the bachelor Fritz to propose, then she must give him 30 dishes of his favorite food: Mitten Crab Soup. Unfortunately, the recipe for Mitten Crab Soup is only unlocked by winning the crop, fishing, or cooking festivals at least four times, and Mitten Crab can only be caught on a certain fishing dock, using the Sacred Rod (which is unlocked only after unlocking the Tropical Country trade vendor—the most difficult and likely the last vendor players will unlock) during a thunderstorm (Fogu 2015). Since villagers will only accept gifts

once per day, and it may take quite a while to compile the necessary ingredients to make the soup, players seeking to have Fritz propose will have to suffer hundreds of hours of repetitive gameplay in order to achieve the specific proposal scene. Of course, if the player wishes to propose to Fritz herself, the requirements are much less outrageous. But then, why must there be additional work for desiring an alternate outcome, and why must players struggle through unenjoyable gameplay to access the part of the game they do enjoy? Is maintaining a successful farm the 'point' of the *Story of Seasons*, or is it the character interactions and the story? Answering this question clarifies the difference between ludology and narratology in the field of game studies.

Ludology, as defined by game developer and researcher Gonzolo Frasca in 2001, is "a discipline that studies games in general, and video games in particular," (1). Ludologists have two primary beliefs: games and narrative are two separate things, and games are not expansions of novels or movies, but include elements of stories, like character, plot, and setting. Ultimately, the aim of ludology is to understand games and videogames, focusing primarily on the aspect of "play" that was mentioned earlier. In an article entitled," Simulation versus narrative" Frasca further clarifies what exactly he means by play, and how that might be distinguished from narrative. He writes, "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system," (Frasca 223). He gives the example of watching a video of a plane versus playing a game in which you are piloting the plane. In the game, there is an interactivity or maneuverability that unavailable in simply watching. From video to videogame, there is a transition from observation to participation, as he emphasizes there are inherent differences between watching a game of soccer and playing a game of soccer. In essence, simulation is what many refer to as "gameplay" or "game

mechanics." Ludology, then, is meant to analyze a game for its simulation, "because simulations can express messages in ways that narrative simply cannot, and vice versa," (Frasca 225).

Narratology, on the other hand, argues that games should be viewed primarily as vehicles for telling stories. Narrative theorist Dino Felluga states that narratology, "examines the ways that narrative structures our perception of both cultural artifacts and the world around us." This definition is quite broad, and may even seem incompatible with videogames, as the mechanical aspects of games (programming, level design, user interface) do not seem to be represented by narratology. Yet narratologists like Henry Jenkins argue that narratology is compatible with videogames, since gaming is a new and largely unexplored medium for telling stories. The problem is that there is a distinction between the way literature scholars use narratology and the way videogame scholars use it. The former addresses aspects of culture, society, temporality, literature, and so on; the latter addresses storytelling in videogames.

In an effort to resolve this dilemma, Michael Mateas proposes that the word "narrativism" be used when discussing storytelling in gaming, and "narrativist" be used when referring to scholars who believe, "narrative and literary theory as the foundation upon which to build a theory of interactive media." In the case of *Story of Seasons*, narrativists would argue that the gameplay was impeding the player from experiencing the story and atmosphere of the world by constantly interrupting the plot to require the player to perform menial tasks, like spending a week catching and selling fish in order have enough money to buy a certain bachelor's favorite gift in order to get a new dialogue option. Ludologists might argue that since *Story of Seasons* is a farming simulator, the narrative aspect of romancing the local singles isn't the only feature of the game, but one of many. The story, if there is one, simply fits into the larger context of a game about accumulating recipes, raising animals, and growing crops.

Unfortunately, neither narrativism nor ludology nor narratology are sufficient concepts for analyzing most games, because of the way that they view narrative in games. All of these disciplines assume that narrative is a separate element, apart from the simulation or game mechanics in a videogame. Game designers Andrew Rollings and Earnest Adams wrote in their book *On Game Design*, "…we've defined narrative to mean the noninteractive part of a computer game's story, the part in which you as the designer and author tell the player things without letting him do anything," (113 Rollings, Adams). They claim that games consist of gameplay and narrative, as interactive and non-interactive elements, respectively. However, narrative is not disjointed from gameplay but often intertwined and experienced *through* gameplay.

For example, in the horror game *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* the terror of the things lurking in the castle and the madness of the main character are reinforced through the game mechanics. As you (the player) stand in the light, monsters will be more able to find you. But, in standing in the darkness, you begin to go mad. The tension lies in guiding the amnesiac protagonist through the castle, solving puzzles along the way, while compromising between physical safety and mental well-being. (I will revisit the topic of tension in the next section.) Madness and fear of monsters are ideas or feelings that the simulation attempts to draw upon. They are not they simulation themselves, but tied to a larger narrative. It is possible, in games like *Amnesia,* to make the player experience narrative through the simulation, rather than having it recounted to them. There is a difference between the player feeling scared and the character saying, "I'm scared."

The mindset of separating narrative from simulation is harmful to both players and developers. The best example of this harm is in the case of cut scenes, or "a scene that develops

the storyline and is often shown on completion of a certain level, or when the player's character dies." In cut scenes, there is a clear distinction between story and game, because as the game seeks to develop the story, the player is unable to do anything but watch. The first cut scene was used in the original Donkey Kong arcade game, published by Nintendo in July 1981. An animation depicted Mario's girlfriend (she didn't have a name at this time) being kidnapped by Donkey Kong. The cut scene heightened the stakes of the game by explaining why the player was completing certain tasks (like jumping over barrels). While cut scenes can be beneficial in this way, they are often detrimental to players because they don't let players *play.*

Videogame scholar Huaxin Wei writes, "…as long as the split view remains that narrative and gameplay stand independent of each other, the role of narrative will be limited to the presentation of the non-interactive events of the game," (14). In viewing narrative and simulation as separate, game developers may end up structuring their games in terms of "interactive" bits where the player takes control and "non-interactive bits," where the story is simply told to the player. But ultimately, this makes the game less effective at both communicating a story and less immersive for the player, since there are gaps in playability.

The best games feature what John Bain refers to as a "marrying of game mechanics and narrative," but even this implies that narrative and mechanics are somehow detached. Moreover, it seems that our definition of "narrative" may still be vague at best. Critics and scholars may argue unnecessarily because, "…each theorist has different terms for explaining the same phenomenon," (Felluga).

Definitions of "narrative" range from Wikipedia's definition of "a spoken or written account of connected events; a story" to Steven Corman's definition of"a system of stories," to

Peter Brooks' definition of narrative being "the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically…. with the problem of temporality."

In having so many definitions of narrative, narrativism and ludology as methods of analysis are greatly disjointed. Theorists such as Brooks have posed problems in the literary community by expanding common terms such as "plot" and "narrative" to refer to entirely different phenomena. Brooks uses narrative as a method for discussing time and human mortality, which is vastly different from the recounting of connected events. Moreover, when discussing narrative in videogames, there is some confusion as to whether every action the player undergoes is narrative or whether narrative solely refers to storytelling.

Critic Monica Joyce Evans defines narrative in games as "'content,'" including everything from gameplay mechanics to level design as part of the presented story," but then contradicts this by writing that, "Games are primarily an interactive, not a narrative medium," (Joyce 41,42). If games do not primarily function as narrative then, by extension, they do not function as the level design or mechanics associated with the narrative.

Returning to Frasca's model of simulation and narrative, there is something inherently flawed about the way we perceive videogames versus other games. Many videogame scholars will write that board games, tabletop games, sports, and so forth are "beyond the scope" of their focus or "not directly addressed" by their argument, yet they build their theories in relation to Frasca's foundational theory of simulation. Frasca uses a child playing with a toy plane and a soccer game as examples of simulation, and compares that interactivity to the interactivity in videogames. However, Frasca fails to understand that there is a difference between playing with a toy plane, which is actual simulation, and what videogames do, which is *cyber simulation*. In cyber simulation, there are things that are in the way of the player directly interacting with the

game. Namely, games do not exist in our physical world. They do not exist like a soccer ball, or like a toy airplane. The reason that narratologists have adapted videogames as storytelling devices is because their narrative content exists within the realm of an imagined reality, much like characters in a book or movie do. We have tools to interact with this imagined reality, but because videogames are not a part of our 3D world, we need narrative in order to be able to access the simulation. A soccer ball in our world may simply be a soccer ball, but in videogames, our rules do not apply. Narrative is necessary in constructing an artificial world, or digital world, for the simulation to exist.

Moreover, according to ludologists like Frasca, simulation allows players to experience and produce a variety of outcomes—to experiment—while narrative is pre-determined and forces players into something of a spectator role. While it is true that narrative in videogames is somewhat static (meaning that it may be interacted with but not directly controlled by the player, or is sometimes altogether abstract, as the fear of death may be present in a survival horror game) it is not correct to claim that narrative forces players to be spectators, merely observing instead of playing. Narrative is not necessarily a static thing. It is a fluctuating thing, for it exists within the realm of interpretation. Narrative is encoded by the authors (developers and game designers) and decoded by those who consume the narrative (players).

In the case of quick time events, Frasca's model of the simulation being interactive and the narrative being purely observational simply does not work. A "quick time event" or QTE is a substitution for the cutscene that was mentioned earlier. Instead of forcing the player to sit idly by and have the story told to them, QTEs allow players limited control of their character by performing the prompted action in a scene. Failure to complete the action results in consequences for the character (in a fight scene, this is often manifested as the character being

struck instead of dodging or striking back) and sometimes a "game over." Yu Suzuki, director of the 1999 Sega game Shenmue, coined the term, saying the QTEs were to provide "a fusion of gameplay and movie." In Tell Tale Games' *The Walking Dead* and *The Wolf Among Us*, players have a limited amount of time to choose a dialogue option when talking to non-playable characters, or NPCs. Failure to choose an option may affect later events of the game or character relationships. *Heavy Rain* is also a notable example of QTEs merging interactive narrative (and not observational), as during certain scenes, failure to complete the prompted commands results in character death and a different ending to the game. Quick time events heighten the tension dramatically, as the player's ability to follow prompts directly contributes to the game's narrative.

Simulation and narrative are not always distinct, and one often influences or dramatically impacts the other. Ludologists like Frasca argue that narrative is a static, pre-determined model given to the player by the developers, but that is not necessarily true. Videogame scholar Dave Jones writes:

> Narrative is built in at least two different locations: for both the author *and* the audience. There is the narrative that the author builds with tools like setting, character development, plot, mood, etc. The audience then uses the information an author encodes into a book or poem through language and reconstructs what the author wrote, though often emphasizing different aspects of the artifact, (23).

The "encoding" that Jones mentions refers to a process by which the writer places meaning or hidden information in a text, and readers "decode" it or attempt to recognize and understand the hidden information. In this way, narrative is not static, since it fluctuates in form as information is passed from author to reader. In other words, ludologists do not account for the interpretive

elements of narrative. Plot might be static—although in some games the plot is not static, but constantly shifting due to player interaction—but the way the narrative is interpreted or discovered by the player is not static.

Narrative may be many things. If a game is composed of narrative and gameplay/simulation, then narrative is the bones of the game. It is the framework for both enacting the simulation and for telling a story. It is everything from the world of the game, the level design, character models, user interface, the conflict and objectives, textual descriptions and dialogue, and the concept behind the game itself, also referred to as the high concept. (In the next section, I will go into more detail about how narrative operates within a game.)

However, most scholars and developers would argue that the "bones" of a game is in the simulation, as that directly relates to the game's programming. The simulation of a game can be broken and *fixed.* However, narrative may also be broken, and it also requires proper coding to work in many instances. For example, if the "map" in a game--that is the environment the character interacts in and the level design of that environment—did not load properly, it wouldn't matter if the character could run, jump, or shoot things. The player would not be able to play the game because the environment, which is a layer of narrative, failed to function.

In prioritizing simulation, ludology has difficulty addressing story-driven games like *The Wolf Among Us*, where the gameplay is very limited. Videogame Critic Sparky Clarkson writes, "If we are to cast aside narrative entirely, then a game's only logical goal is to fulfill its implicit function. That is, making games better means *making them better at being played*." Ludology measures games by their playability. But this is vague, for what is playability really measuring? Is it measuring the hours players spend on the game? The enjoyment? How engaging it is? How believable the simulation is? It's difficult to measure a player's engagement with a game. Going

by this model, *Angry Birds* or *Bejeweled*, which have garnered immense popularity, are better games than some games with multi-million dollar budgets, simply because of the amount of time and dedication players spend on the game.

Finally, if game mechanics, or simulation, were always the driving force behind a game, then we wouldn't have the emotional impact from the last line of the *Last of Us.* We wouldn't have games like *The Walking Dead* that rely very little on simulation, yet have had great commercial success. We wouldn't have any need to make things pretty, or to sound nice, or to create interesting characters or fantastic worlds. If manipulation was the only reason people play games, then everything would be minimalistic and barebones. People wouldn't spend money on skins for online multiplayer games like *Overwatch* or *CSGO* when the simulation is more important. It wouldn't matter what things *looked* like, only the degree to which they are interactive and the rules of the game (combat rules, goals, etc.) are engaging. For some games, like *Chess*, of course the game is more about the simulation, and people play the game to interact with the mechanics. But the narrative is equally important, for it is also the space that allows the chess pieces to move around. It is the board, the user interface, and the design of the pieces. For the *Chess* board game, it is still possible to pick up a *Chess* piece without the board, or without starting a "game." However, in virtual *Chess,* every interaction must be programmed within a digital environment, as a layer of narrative. Without narrative, there would be no simulation.

Narratology, which prioritizes the narrative aspect of games, has problems of its own. Clarkson writes:

> Narratological critique struggles to deal with sports games, puzzle games, and multiplayer games. Since narratology addresses how effective the game is at telling a story, it struggles when the primary function of a particular game is not to tell a story.

> What is the story in Pong? In a multiplayer zombie game? In FIFA? Certainly, narratology may interpret the game as simply a series of events, and judge the game by how the series of events creates player experience. But not only is this too broad and difficult for actual critics to use in practice, (what would a review of *Shadow of Mordor* look like if we were only addressing the game as a series of events?) but it is simply disingenuous to the videogame medium.

A videogame *can* tell a story, but that does not mean that all do or desire to. Sometimes what narratologists classify as videogame "stories" are not stories at all. In the example of the original *Donkey Kong,* "Mario's girlfriend is captured and needs to be rescued" is not a story, any more than "Harry Potter finds out he's a wizard and goes to school for wizards." They are both premises, which falls under narrative. Story is also a part of narrative, but it is not necessary for a game to function. I define a story as an "oral, written, experienced, or understood account of events," and take this meaning partly from the Oxford English Dictionary. John Bain says that, "[Developers] need to understand that narrative is best experienced in games, not shown or told," (2013). Any story that a game can tell may be better told through a book or play or movie, which lack the element of simulation. Games may be best understood as experiences, and the goal for developers should be to construct games that allow players to *experience* what it is like to a character, rather than being *told* or *shown* what it is like.

James Portnow claims that games, "…need to tell their story through the gameplay. Narrative should drip from every texture and be integrated into every facet of the world," (2014). Despite this, one of the predominant mindsets that has persisted in the gaming community for many years is the idea that narrative is "extra," or an unnecessary addition to the gameplay, like the pretty frame around a picture. Perhaps it is because the earliest videogames lacked a formal

story, as did many arcade games that are considered classics, like *Space Invaders*. Or perhaps it is because of games like *Elite* that included a written story with the game, which helped to separate simulation from story even further. Regardless, there has been much resistance over the years to regard narrative as equally importance as simulation, and narrativism, narratology, and ludology remain contested schools of thought.

In response, Janet Murray and many others have approached a middle path, called ludonarrative by some scholars. She writes:

> Those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other. The ludology vs narratology argument can never be resolved because one group of people is defining both sides of it…. games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories…

A ludonarrative approach recognizes that game and narrative are different, yet intertwined. Returning to the example of *Story of Seasons*, a ludonarrative approach would argue that some gamers value growing crops, unlocking new recipes, and winning festivals, while others might value the characters and the story. The best solution might not be to make changes in one that would accommodate for the other (like removing tedious aspects of farming that interfere with the story) but to make changes in both gameplay and narrative to ensure that they complement each other.

For instance, one might wonder why the character Fritz must be given 30 Mitten Crab Soups so that he will propose, rather than 29. The game mechanics do not match the narrative, especially since by the time the player accumulates 30 Mitten Crabs, Fritz will have a red flower

next to his name, indicating that he is in love with the player's character. If the narrative and game mechanics were working together, then the player would not have to repeat the same tasks for hundreds of hours in anticipation of a single dialogue exchange. This a rather extreme example of dissonance between simulation and narrative, but the idea is still the same. A ludonarrative approach to videogames seeks to account for all games, whether story-driven or otherwise, by uniting simulation and narrative.

Therefore, I will take a ludonarrative approach for the rest of this paper, and the assumptions that I make about videogames are as follows:

1. Not all games have stories.
2. All games have narrative that allow the simulation and story to exist.
3. All games must have a working simulation to be defined as a game.
4. Games should be judged according to how narrative and simulation interact with each other.
5. Videogames are not about simulation or story or experimentation. They are about experience.

These assumptions govern the analysis for the remaining chapters, which will view how narrative operates in games and horror games in particular, how developers create narrative that players may interact with, and how horror creates a doubling effect in videogames.

Ch. 2 Game-Narrative Models and Anxieties of the Game Interface

John Carmack, creator of *Doom,* is famously reported to have said, "Story in a game is like story in a porn movie. It's expected to be there, but it's not that important." Though this was quoted in the mid-nineties and Carmack was referring solely to story (a telling or account of events) rather than narrative (the space where the simulation exists), it still begs the question: what is the function of narrative in videogames?

Henry Jenkins provides five different ways in which narrative is layered inside a videogame: environmental storytelling, enacting stories, evocative spaces, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives. Environmental storytelling refers to games' "spaces," or the world in which the game exists. Some games, like Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* series create elaborate lore (involving elves, men, dwarves, dragons, etc.) and fantastic landscapes that reflect that lore. Other games, like *Pong,* create very simple environments (in this case a black background with a white line down the center). The vertical movement of the white lines that bounce the circle back and forth is meant to simulate tennis. But in order for tennis to be simulated, there must be a tennis court. Narrative exists as the environment or the world inside even simple games like *Pong,* as it would be impossible for the white *Pong* pieces to move around without a space to move around *in*. The frame for the simulation is just as important as the simulation itself.

"Enacting stories" refers to the conflict and the player's interaction with it, "in terms of broadly defined goals or conflicts and on the level of localized incidents," (Jenkins 7). Games may pose objectives for their players to complete, which is apart from simulation, as the player cannot *interact* or control the objectives, but only attempt to complete them. At a localized level, there is player vs. player conflict and player vs. environment conflict (much like in a traditional book or movie). In the horror game *Outlast,* an objective given to the player in the beginning is

to break into the asylum. The "localized incidents" occur when the player then has to avoid enemies carrying knives or other weapons and complete tasks to escape from the asylum. The act of hiding from enemies is simulation, but the *reason* for hiding and the bodily horror the game plays upon falls within the realm of narrative. This varies drastically from platforming and flash games like *The Impossible Game*, where the player controls an orange square that jumps over spikes. The "why" behind the game mechanics is not as apparent. Why is the orange square jumping over the spikes? To avoid death? That is certainly narrative-oriented, but only tangentially so. The narrative in horror games differ in their enactment of their conflict, as the objectives and conflicts the character undergoes directly tie to a story or a strong emotional response (usually fear or disgust).

Evocative spaces, "build upon stories or genre traditions already well known to [players], allowing them to enter physically into spaces they have visited many times before in their fantasies," (Jenkins 6). Jenkins gives the example of *American McGee's Alice,* in which Alice returns to Wonderland after her family dies in a fire. The game centers on a mad, murderous Alice, but nonetheless uses the same characters and setting as the original novel. Evocative spaces use familiar landscapes or genre conventions in order to engage players. They may feature their own, original stories or they may not (in many *Lego* games, like *Lego Star Wars and Lego Lord of the Rings*, aside from a bit of slapstick humor, little is changed in terms of story or setting). Adaptations like *American McGee's Alice* utilizes narrative as an evocative space, but so do all games that rely on tropes or genre conventions to garner sales or mask the thinly constructed story. Returning to the example of *Outlast*, the game relies on the convention of a scary, decrepit asylum and murderous, deformed patients that were experimented on, plus a supernatural evil that is slowly killing all the characters. These tropes have been used

exhaustively in books, movie, television, and videogames. The story of *Outlast* doesn't focus too much on character development or complex conflict; it focuses more on body horror, and trying to make the next encounter even more horrible than the last. (*Outlast* is an example of a game that throws one horror after another at the player, without allowing for the tension and release cycle—discussed later—to have an impact.) Evocative spaces are not always used for the right reasons. Of course it may be beneficial to draw on familiar conventions or create a landscape for the player's fantasies, but often the best games will somehow adapt or twist the convention. Games like *Dragon's Dogma* feature the very familiar conceit of being "the chosen one" and saving the kingdom, but the ending takes away the player's sense of power by making him either a cursed deity or the "villain" of the story.

The embedded narrative is a somewhat confusing concept and Don Carson, who designed roller coasters, is a great influence of Jenkin's discussion, since the web-like nature of building the theme park's theme is similar to the narrative in a videogame. Jenkins begins by clarifying the difference between plot, or the author's linear construction of events, and fabula, which is, "the viewer's mental construction of the chronology of those events," (Jenkins 9). He claims that videogame designers, as opposed to writers and film makers, have less control over how the players encounter the plot and how they interpret it. Books and movies have a temporality about them that suggests the correct order in which they ought to be consumed in. Books often have page numbers and chapters, while movies have frames that are time-stamped. Of course, consumers may skip around (except for at the cinema), but most are aware that this may lead to a loss of narrative understanding. Videogames, on the other hand, lend themselves to more freedom and more experimentation. There are certainly games that are very linear in their level design and ordering of plot points, (platformers are perhaps the most linear, as the players move

from the start to the end-point or objective, without much backtracking or detouring) but there is also an abundance of games that are "open-world" or "free-roam," where the player encounters the plot in the order that they choose. *Skyrim* is a good example of this, as players roam the game world completing quests, but may choose to completely ignore the "main story" if they wish, or encounter it on their *own* time, rather than the game's time.

Jenkins continues by claiming that, in order to have more control over the fabula, developers embed the game with symbols or effects that give the player a greater understanding of the narrative. This may manifest in lighting choices, environmental relics (like the crumbling, plant infested buildings in *The Last of Us* that signal a post-apocalyptic world) character models, contested spaces, and so on. In order to make a narrative embedded, the developers must create a mix of "staged spaces" where the player encounters a set piece or artifact or symbol that informs them of the world of the characters, and "contested spaces" where the developer presents a challenge relevant to the narrative, whether picking locks, solving puzzles, or battling past monsters.

Finally, Jenkins comments on the usefulness of embedded narratives to not only serve as relics of past events, but define the kind of game that a player experiences in the present storyline. "Games are no more locked into an eternal present than films are always linear. Many games contain moments of revelation or artifacts that shed light on past actions… As we enter spaces, we may become overwhelmed with powerful feelings of loss or nostalgia, especially in those instances where the space has been transformed by narrative events," (Jenkins 10). One tool for creating this nostalgia is the game space that changes (off screen) due to the plot. The landscape of the game *Loved* changes in response to player's actions. If the player obeys the mysterious, demanding commands on screen, then the landscape changes to make the path easier

to traverse. However, if the player disobeys, the landscape begins to break down, going from stark black and white paths to a glitchy mess of colors.

Jenkins cites melodrama and detective stories as the most common types of genres featuring embedded narrative, since they contain "rationale for our efforts to reconstruct the narrative of past events," (Jenkins 11). But horror also provides rationale for reconstructing narrative. Most horror games and horror films feature evil of some kind, whether in the form of a murderous man, or the madness of the main character, or a malevolent entity. The investigation and piecing together of narrative often involves uncovering what the nature of the evil is. In *Loved,* the player pieces together who is ordering commands, what the relationship between that character and the player might be, and why the landscape changes in response to obeying and disobeying. *Loved* is not classified as a horror game, but contains horror elements that address the abusive nature of the relationship the player is in.

Finally, the last item in Jenkin's architecture of narrative in videogames is the emergent narrative. Gonzalo Frasca claims that the primary function of games is experimentation. While I argue that *experience*, not experimentation, is the primary function of games, that does not mean that games cannot be grounds for experimentation. Emergent narratives are those narratives which are created by the player, using tools given to them by the developers. Jenkins uses the example of *The Sims* but we may also use *Sid Meier's Civilization* series. In both games, the player has a vast amount of control not only over the design of the game (the look of the characters, the house, the ordering of things in a city) but also the plot itself. In the aforementioned *Skyrim,* players may experience the plot in whatever order they choose, but the quests themselves are far more structured. In *The Sims* and *Civilization,* the player is provided all of the pieces for a plot, but not necessarily the structure. Moreover, each session poses some

degree of random generation, so that each new game may be distinct from the last. This allows room for more experimentation, as the player creates a narrative based on the uniqueness of that particular game or game session.

In terms of horror games, I have yet to see any that allow for an emergent narrative. Experimentation can be disastrous in a horror story, as horror games rely on tension and release cycles. If the player is left to their own devices, all the building tension might dissipate, and the terrifying parts may become less terrifying. Tension and release cycles will be discussed shortly, but first, we must clarify some of Jenkins' claims.

According to Jenkins, narrative in videogames functions on five different levels—the game space, the conflict, the embedded landscape, the trope or genre conventions, and the player generated narrative. Embedded landscape accounts for game space and conflict, as it claims that narrative is derived from the artifacts and artistic rendering of environments, and the actions undertaken by the player. Genre conventions are important to the high concept, but it would be better to include all reasoning that goes into the creation of a game. For instance, what narrative elements are being factored in when the design of a game is being discussed? Why choose to include some characters but not others? What will the enemies look like? The layout of the world? Claiming that narrative exists within the high concept accounts for the creation of all games, including those that rely on tropes or player fantasies. As for emergent narratives, while they are important, Jenkins' analysis of them is more result than cause oriented. When describing the functions of narrative, it is important to place narrative in the position of a tool, not an effect. The narrative that a player might create from an open-world game like *The Sims* is better viewed from the way in which a developer crafts set pieces that lend towards narrative experimentation. Therefore, we might say that narrative operates within the temporal structure, character and

landscape design, and the differentiation (for *Sims,* this comes from the game randomly generating certain outcomes, characters, and events) of a game.

Jenkins' theory of narrative architecture is helpful in discussing what narrative can do and what it should do, but before I delve into my own theory, I'd like to examine a few different perspectives on the function of narrative in videogames. Monica Joyce Evans, Bryan Alexander, and Sean Fenty pose helpful models of the developers' role in crafting narrative and the player's role, and how the relationship between them manifests in different games. It is imperative to mention that each of these scholars believe narrative and simulation to be separate, and they are only analyzing games that directly seek to tell a story. This is significantly different from my theory, in which all games have narrative, and therefore, all games should have a dialogue between narrative and simulation.

Evans lists seven types of games, or conventions of games, in which narrative is an integral part of the gameplay experience.

1. Decision Paths and the Branching Story: A game in which the decision-making elements are the driving force behind the game, and alter the experience during the course of the game, the ending, or both. *Until Dawn* is an example of a horror game that relies on players' decisions to advance the plot and to keep characters alive (which is the game's main objective).
2. The Player as Narrative Catalyst: Evans claims that these games are "structurally similar" to the branching story, but "Unlike the traditional branching path, the flow and pacing of these narratives don't depend on player actions," (Evans 50). For example, *Beyond: Two Souls* has set pacing that isn't necessarily influenced by player action, as the game plays through various points in the protagonist's life in the order

that it was designed. The "choice" comes in the interactions with characters that shape relationships and, the player decides the game's ending by choosing from a list. (*Beyond: Two Souls* is another game, like *Loved,* that has horror elements but is not classified as a horror game.)

3. The Player as Actor: Narratologists Janey Murray and Brenda Laurel, as well as Teun Dubbelman, propose this as one of the key manifestations of narrative in games. The player as actor features, "a story that literally happens to the player rather than a representative avatar," (Evans 54). *Five Nights at Freddy's* is a horror game that makes the player the central character in the narrative. *You* are the nightguard who works at a pizzeria, and *you* have to protect yourself from the murderous animatronics. (I will revisit this topic later in part two.)
4. The False or Forced Choice: The false choice is less a game type, and more of a game tool. The player is presented with a choice, only for the outcome of that choice to be the same either way. Evans claims this tool is "usually ineffective" but can work well with plots that can justify the removing player agency. In rare circumstances, false choices might work, but generally they should be avoided altogether. In *Life is Strange,* players were outraged by the ending, which essentially took every choice the player made in the game and made it meaningless.
5. The "String of Pearls": Evans claims these games "…are constructed around separate but connected levels or worlds," (Evans 57). *Okami* is structured in this way, since the player (playing as a Japanese god-dog with a paint brush) must purify the scenery before moving on to the next area. This often results in completing objectives for key characters that allow new skills to be gained and, eventually, new areas to be

unlocked. “String of Pearls” are difficult to make sense in a narrative, since having game areas blocked off until certain conditions are met is restrictive in terms of story structure. Nonetheless, *Okami* and games like it have managed to make the structure work in harmony with narrative.

6. The Player as Narrative Archeologist: This is similar to Jenkins’ notion of the embedded narrative, in which clues relating to the plot or character development are left for players to discover and piece together themselves. Evans writes, “Some games, however, include narratives in which most or all of the major story events take place before the game begins. The player enters either in the last act of the narrative or sometime after the story has taken place and must discover the events of that story by exploring the game environment,” (59). The horror game *Soma* takes the “last act” structure to the extreme. The player begins as a normal human who suffered a brain injury, but then wakes up in a strange, underwater facility where the only inhabitants are robots. The narrative and simulation coincide perfectly, since it is imperative to figure out what happened in the past to make progress in the future. For example, listening and understanding an important character copy (they saved copies of themselves in computers) will allow the player to retrieve the necessary code from the character and continue the game.
7. The Self Referential or Self-Aware Game: This game makes the player aware that they are playing a game. In practice, this often manifests in making sense of generally accepted videogame logic. The example Evans uses is *Prince of Persia,* which puts the player’s death—something that players normally consider to be outside the realm of their concern—in a narrative context. “Each time the player is killed, often by

> falling, failing to avoid a trap, or being overcome by sand creatures, the Prince himself interjects, saying "That didn't happen" or "Wait, I didn't fall…Let me start again" (Ubisoft 2003). The implication is that the Prince hasn't died, but rather has erred in his narration of events. Not only does this structure invoke the oldest kind of interactive narrative, the oral story, it neatly envelops the game's mechanics into the narrative rather than ignoring them," (Evans 65).

Evans' seven narrative types, except for perhaps the false choice narrative, exemplifies how a finished game might be classified if the simulation is designed to be experienced through the narrative, or alongside the narrative (rather than two forces battling for supremacy). However, Evans does not provide a means for developers to achieve these narrative types.

Brian Alexander, on the other hand, addresses developers directly, by claiming that they need to create "spatial immersion," (which is very similar to Jenkins' embedded narrative theory). He writes, "…if we manipulate objects, they react reasonably, and the world changes in accordance with our actions: immersive world as feedback loop. Digital platforms are akin to participatory theater, with the imaginative engagement the stage creates," (Alexander 93). Alexander recommends that developers use sound, text, and cinematic sequences (namely cut scenes) as tools for making a world that is believable and engaging for the player. And, like Jenkins, he draws upon Don Carson for comparison. Further, immersion is sensual and multimedia in nature. As Carson wrote of his pirate theme, "Every texture you use, every sound you play, every turn in the road should reinforce the concept of 'pirates!'" (Carson 12). Alexander's "spatial immersion" theory is beneficial, as it further clarifies how games should teach players how to interact with the game in a narrative context.

Sean Fenty describes the role of the developer and the player in crafting successful videogame narratives. He claims that,

> Our ability to enjoy and learn from narrative hinges on our ability to empathize with others. Empathy is the engine the drives meaningful narrative experiences… The heart of a game is player agency—players experience a game not just by seeing it, or even by being in it, but by doing in it. The skillful combination of these two elements—empathy and agency—on the part of game makers is what makes for a compelling, artful videogame narrative. It is through this combination that profound ideas and powerful emotions manifest in videogame narratives, (Fenty 65).

Fenty subdivides games that employ what he calls an "interactive narrative" or a narrative that "allows someone other than the author to affect, choose, or change the plot," by placing them on a spectrum between emergent games and progression games (65). Emergent games are another way of referencing Jenkins' emergent narratives, and they give a great deal of agency to the player (again, *The Sims* is typified as this kind of game). Progression games are those that restrict the player's freedom, and impose a more structured narrative onto the player. Fenty argues for a games that compromise between these two extremes, but his analysis is symptomatic of a larger problem (one that was discussed in part one): it is possible to have narrative experienced *through* simulation and, in fact, it should be expected.

We should not think of imposing narrative as taking away control from the player, but contextualizing their actions and making them feel connected to the narrative at large. In a horror game, we might want to make the player feel terrified, or ashamed; we may want to instill doubt in them, and have that doubt linger long after they put down the game. Narrative and simulation have little to do with empathy or removing interactivity. Yes, there are games in which players

should feel empathy for the characters (like the emotional journey in *The Last of Us*), but that doesn't mean that *all* games should invoke empathy. What kind of empathy should a player have in *Space Invaders*, or open-world games like *Sid Meier's Civilization*? These games also have narrative, since all games do, but when coupled with a concept like empathy, developers might be confused as to what their actual role is in crafting narrative.

The various theories that have been explored, particularly Jenkins' and Alexander's, regarding the function of narrative in videogames are beneficial in how we think about narrative and its range of possibilities. In the next section, I will propose my own theory about game narratives, and discuss the role of narrative in horror games, especially.

Ch. 3 A New Game-Narrative Model: Toward the Horror Game

My theory of the function of narrative in videogames stems from critics James Portnow and John Bain, as well as some ideas associated with Henry Jenkins, Monica Joyce Evans, and Brian Alexander. Other scholars, like Sean Fenty, have tried to analyze game narratives from the perspective of developer and player. I take a slightly different approach and analyze narratives from the perspective of developers crafting games for their players. As John Bain has iterated time and again, "Remember who is playing your game," (2013).

Videogame narrative usage may be categorized as follows:

1. Tension
2. Embedded Interface
3. Embedded Environment
4. Resource Management
5. Player Correlation
6. Choice
7. Consequence
8. Rewards

These are not types of games, as Evans provides, nor are they layers of narrative, as Jenkins supplies. Aside from tension, each of these aspects examines how narrative functions on a structural level. Tension is somewhat different, since good tension is the goal that narrative should be working towards, using the subsequent tools (2-8) to get there.

It is said that the heart of every story is tension, whether between characters, between a character and some greater force, or inside a character. Regardless, games also thrive on tension.

Recalling John Bain's requirements for a videogame, he says that games must be, "a challenge of some description." The tension lies in the difference between what the player wants and the barriers placed by the developer that prevent it from being obtained. Fenty writes that, "A well designed videogame is like a good parent who wants to let her child eventually beat her at the game, but plays well enough to make the game a challenge for the child, and makes sure that the child will only eventually win if the child learns how to play better," (84). Tension isn't simply synonymous with challenge, but also refers to the player's engagement—what keeps them playing the game. Tension may be divided into two forms: malleable tension and static tension.

Malleable tension is tension that differs slightly every time upon playing the game, and may be directly shaped by the player. For instance, most competitive online multi-player games have malleable tension, since the nature of the conflict is not always the same. There is always a combination of different players and often different maps that makes for a variable play experience. Likewise, "dungeon crawlers" (games in which the player traverses levels in a dungeon, complete with monsters and rewards) that are randomly generated, like *The Binding of Isaac*, are slightly different upon each iteration, which is the reason that some players have logged a thousand hours into the game. Malleable tension is not always ideal, since developers want people to play their games, but publishers want people to *buy* their games. If players are still satisfied with *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 1*, why would they buy *Modern Warfare 2*?

Static tension is tension that becomes exhaustive after one or two iterations. Players *can* continuously play the game, but most would see this as *re-playing it*, and not simply playing it. Online games and randomly generated games are able to engage players without feeling boring or repetitive. There is not necessarily an "end" to games with malleable tension. Games with static tension, however, often have clear endings, or signifiers that the player has "beat" the

game. Developers have compensated in some ways for the aversion to replaying static games, with features like New Game +, achievements, and multiple endings. New Game + involves restarting the game with the same skills and weapons, and facing new challenges that were not available until after the game was "beaten." Both New Game + and multiple endings incentivize playing the game again by leaving players with more challenges to encounter after the game is completed. (*Story of Seasons* takes compensating for static tension to an entirely new level by putting key features behind walls that can only be unlocked after a certain amount of in game time, or by tedious effort. The reasoning is that the player can never finish the game if it is impossible *to* finish, but this is not an advisable tactic for developers.)

Puzzle games and horror games almost always have static tension, since it is difficult to recreate the experience of playing the game for the first time. *Limbo,* a platforming horror game, would not be as engaging if the player already knew what the solutions to the puzzles were, or when exactly the horrifying parts occur. Part of horror is the sense of accompanying dread. James Portnow characterizes this as a tension and release cycle. "Horror is about a cycle of tension and release…As you play through, watch for the sections where they let you walk through with nothing happening. In most games this would be the death of engagement. But in a horror game, this is what brings it all together. Why? Because the best horror lets you do the work for it," (Portnow 2014). Returning to the example of *Silent Hills PT*, each loop around the hallway builds tension, which is released when the player reaches the door at the end. But, in reaching the door at the end, the horror only escalates and the tension only builds further. It is a temporary relief to an always heightening sense of dread. If a player were to replay *Silent Hills PT* and remember when the horrifying parts happen, that cycle of tension would be ineffective. Therefore, the kind of tension that horror games should create is the kind that lingers after the

player has put down the game, or changes the way they see the world. This often manifests in embedded interface and embedded environment.

An embedded interface makes the game interface (the simulation, or things that the player may interact with in the game world) correlate to the narrative. On the other hand, an embedded environment makes the environment of the game world correlate to the narrative, and accounts for what may not be interacted with, or interacted with only minimally (lighting choices, sound, level design, item design, etc.). The embedded interface and embedded environment reflect Henry Jenkins' "embedded narratives" and Brian Alexander's "spatial immersion" theories. Since Alexander's spatial immersion theory is incomplete in its tools for embedding narrative in the environment and interface (he only lists the use of sound, text, and cinematic sequences as possible avenues for developers, but there is also lighting, animation, pacing of the conflict and story, etc.) it is helpful in determining how games ought to embed narratives, but not sufficient on its own. For Jenkins' embedded narrative theory, he groups what can be interacted with and what cannot be interacted with together, but I believe they function very differently in the way they embed narrative.

Using the example of *Resident Evil 7*'s demo, the mechanics of the game support the concept behind the narrative. During the first play through of the demo, the player encounters a video that reveals a secret lever under the fireplace. On the second play through, if the player pulls the lever at the beginning, a different series of events and objectives unfold. The "family" of the house you are exploring are actually possessed creatures that come back to life after they've been killed. The narrative explored is one of cursed regeneration and multiple deaths, which makes sense not only for purposes of branching paths and repetitive gameplay that relies

on past play throughs, but the narrative also makes sense of videogame deaths in general, as it gives a reason for "respawning" after death (since you become cursed yourself).

Another example is in the horror game *Outlast II,* in which the player is a cameraman looking for his kidnapped wife amongst a host of murderous Christians and pagans. At certain points, the environment of the game changes from a woodsy area with log cabins to a Catholic middle school. The Catholic school is a hallucination/memory inside the cameraman's mind, so it is imperative that the actions the player is making in the woods correlate to the ones he is making in the school. For instance, if the player is running away from pagans in the woods, and then suddenly he is running away from a monster in the Catholic school, it would make sense that, when the hallucination stops, he is somewhere else in the woods than before the hallucination began. In this case, the cameraman is substituting the deranged pagans and Christians for a many-armed monster, the woods for a Catholic school, and his wife for a girl named Jessica. (At one point, he even confuses who he is saving in the woods, his wife, for who he is saving in the school, Jessica, which indicates he is having difficulty distinguishing reality from hallucination.) Referring to Alexander's spatial immersion theory again, the world must change "in accordance with our actions." In other words, the actions that we perform as players must make sense in the larger context of the game. If the player controlled a character who was meant to be a paragon of virtue and justice, but the game required the player to brutally kill every enemy, there would be a discrepancy between the high concept of the game and the player interaction. Likewise, if in *Outlast II,* the player hallucinates while being chased by murderous Christians, but he hallucinates that he is strapped to a chair, it wouldn't make much sense. Having movement on one level (the "real" world in the game), while being stationary on another

level (the "nightmare" world) would make for a very confusing narrative, since he is supposed to be substituting one world for another.

An embedded interface works well if the actions the player takes makes sense with what the player knows the game to be about. To achieve this, we turn again to the "contested spaces" of Jenkins' embedded narrative theory. The challenge in *Outlast II* is to survive the monsters and murderous villagers, but as a cameraman, the player is ill equipped to handle weapons or combat. Instead, the simulation centers around squeezing between tight spaces while running away, hiding in barrels and lockers, sneaking around to avoid detection, and so on.

Embedded environments function differently in regards to narrative. They not only immerse the player, as Alexander suggests, but they also teach the player how to play and understand the game. Using the example of *Outlast II* again, when the cameraman hallucinates image of Jessica screaming "He's coming!" and running to the left, the player (who is now being chased by the monster) is being told to follow her to safety. Jessica is part of the environment of the Catholic school (she can't be touched or interacted with) but she does provide clues as to what the cameraman is struggling with psychologically and often hints as to how the player should play the game.

Embedded environments are similar to Jenkin's "staged spaces" in which the space informs the player of the characters and world around them, but it also serves to immerse the player and convince them to keep playing the game. The interior décor of a house might be informative of what kind of person lives there, but it also helps to create the atmosphere and pleasure (or displeasure) of living in that house. The embedded environment is informative *and* experiential. In a review of *Persona 5*, game critic Zero Punctuation said, "If you're going to make a 60 hour RPG…have more than one music track for standard battles." Listening to the

same song repeatedly can make the simulation itself seem repetitive or frustrating. The embedded environment serves to correlate to the narrative of the game, but functions on a second level of immersing the player in an environment that provides the intended experience. In a horror game, that experience might be terror as the player is running from monsters, or dread as he waits for the monsters to return. However, the developer should never sow frustration into the fabric of the environment. If the environment is frustrating or displeasing, then the simulation will also suffer.

James Portnow claims that development teams should be aware of the narrative from the outset, and work to make that narrative realized in every part of the game. "Let's say James is going to make a game. He would start his narrative simply by trying to understand what emotion or idea he wanted to explore with the game. Then, he would work with his team to find really compelling mechanics that in some way explore that idea or convey that emotion," (Portnow 2013). Developers have an array of tools that allow them to make the game correlate to its narrative, the most important of that being an idea or emotion that everyone involved in the game is working towards. Videogame narratives will thrive if the developers focus on what story or idea the game *can* communicate, rather than having a pre-set story from the beginning.

Another way to craft games that reflect their narratives is through resource management. This involves utilizing every aspect of the game to its fullest narrative potential, even if that aspect is small. An example of this is the under-utilization of text, whether a description of a weapon, the written responses to characters, the text in menus, or title screens, and so on. Alexander claims that, "A game' s text is also crucial in shaping the user's experience of play and story," and scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue that "narrative descriptors…carry a large amount of story in a small space," (Alexander 95; Salen, Zimmerman

15). Word choice directly factors into the closeness of the text to the narrative of the game. In *Undertale,* when the game is saved, the text doesn't just say, "The game is saved." The first save point says, "The shadow of the ruins looms above, filling you with determination. HP fully restored." The save point informs the player the game is saved *and* characterizes the world of the game, and therefore the resource (a save point, which is standard in many games) is being used to its full potential.

Portnow claims that resource management is one of the many pitfalls of bad game design. Videogames, unlike any other medium, must deal with "information for the player." "Ultimately this means that for a videogame, every word, every line of dialogue is precious. We have to get the most out of every phrase we write, including lines that give the players instructions," (Portnow 2016). In order to make the narrative content more interesting and more believable, the text should also serve to characterize either the world, or the characters, or the idea behind the game. But this doesn't just pertain to in-game text. "Information for the player" may manifest as tutorials, techniques, observations, notifications, etc. *Undertale* is a prime example of good resource management, as even the tutorial in the beginning is directly tied to narrative. After falling down a hole where monsters live, the player meets Flowey, the happy, smiling flower. "You're new to the Underground, aren'tcha?" he says. "Golly, you must be so confused. Someone ought to teach you how things work around here." Then Flowey tries to kill you (the player). While teaching the player how combat and character interactions work, the game characterizes Flowey and sets up grim expectations for the rest of the game.

Player correlation is the correlation between the narrative and the player, and it is vital to horror games. While embedded environments draw the player in and engage them with an idea or feeling that they take part in enacting, player correlation points the tension back at the player,

and asks them to look for the conflict within themselves. Portnow says that, "We all have numerous root areas that make us uncomfortable because they represent our baser nature. Things we keep hidden or are ashamed of and left unresolved. When you couple these things with a fear for the flesh—a fear for life itself—you get horror. [Great horror] often deals with a character's secret shame. Or even more creepy, the [player's] secret shame," (2012). Player correlation in horror games plays upon the darker nature found in all of us, which Carl Jung refers to as the "Shadow." The Shadow, the Uncanny, the self, and the double self are all tools that allow developers to call upon the player's "secret shame," and make them feel horrified.

The "Shadow" may be defined as, "The space between what we believe ourselves to be and what we are," while the self consists of, "What we believe ourselves to be, what we are, and what we show the world," (Portnow 2012). The Shadow is the dark underbelly of human nature. It is the twisted self that we deny any connection to. Jung writes that,

> To confront a person with his shadow is to show him his own light. Once one has experienced a few times what it is like to stand judgingly between the opposites, one begins to understand what is meant by the self. Anyone who perceives his shadow and his light simultaneously sees himself from two sides and thus gets in the middle, (872).

In many games, the player identifies with the avatar, as one might say, "I completed a quest in *Skyrim*…" rather than "my avatar completed a quest in *Skyrim*…" There is a self, and then a game-self. But in horror games, the Shadow comes into full light. All of the terrible things that we are capable of as humans is put into the spotlight and made to be endured. Abuse, murder, cannibalism, etc. may also be in non-horror games (as *Skyrim* is not a horror game but does feature murder) but do not reflect the "secret shame," of the player, as it were. The horror game *Off* at first convinces the player that they are hero, triumphantly defeating enemies to save a

child. In the end, the player finds out they are the villain all along, and after murdering everyone, they can only roam the empty game world, until they eventually hit the switch "OFF" which ends the game. *Off* reminds players of their potential for committing atrocities in the physical world, by forcing them to commit atrocities in the digital world. One of the goals of horror games should be to invoke the kind of player correlation that makes players feel that "secret shame," reminding us of the Shadow within us all.

Another facet of player correlation is blurring the distinction between self and game-self by removing the protagonist, placing the point of view in first person, encouraging the player to substitute the character for themselves. In the first-person survival horror *Five Night's at Freddy's,* the player is a substitution for the nameless main character.

> Welcome to your new summer job at Freddy Fazbear's Pizza, where kids and parents alike come for entertainment and food as far as the eye can see! ...From your small office you must watch the security cameras carefully. …If something isn't right- namely if Freddybear or his friends aren't in their proper places, you must find them on the monitors and protect yourself if needed! …Can you survive five nights at Freddy's?

This text is taken from the description on the game's website. The "you" here suggests that the player is the character, rather than controlling the character. The combination of the first-person point of view, the absence of any character, and the inclusion of the word "you" links the identity between player and avatar, blurring the lines between the physical world and the digital one. This format falls in line with Evans' "Player as Actor" narrative type, since the player experiences the narrative as if they, themselves, are the protagonist. There is the illusion of not only being inside the character's head, but of also *being* the character.

The use of "you" is particularly effective, since it is not being used in casual speech (in which its meaning can be vague) but in written text meant to describe the game. In other words, the you is intentional, and even instrumental in creating horror in some cases. As Jill Walker writes,

> You assume that you're the "you", for an instant at least. You turn because the word YOU is empty in itself. The vacuum inside it sucks you in, filling itself with you, and it will take a moment before you realize that you may not belong there. The word "you" is ready to be filled by anyone. It is empty: it doesn't refer outside of the situation in which it is uttered. There is a word for this emptiness: deixis. …Their power lies in this emptiness. Filling the empty space of a "you" can be "wonderfully stirring" . . . for a reader, as writers and rhetoricians have known since ancient times, (Walker 26).

More than being "wonderfully stirring," they can be wonderfully *disturbing* when placed in the wrong context. As we mentioned before, the self is composed of the different ways in which we see ourselves and how we are actually seen. If there is a major discrepancy between the two, there is horror. In *Soma*, The game is in first-person, so in many ways we are also the protagonist, as we see through their eyes and control their actions. The main character has some personality, but for the most part, he is a blank slate, and players are encouraged to imagine themselves as the character. After waking up in the deserted underwater facility, the protagonist *sees* themselves as human, and we see ourselves as human too. However, when the protagonist finally looks in the mirror, he discovers he is not human, but a robot like everyone else. We are not human, even though we are. *Soma* sets up an expectation (a human exploring an underwater facility), and then changes it (a robot escaping from an underwater facility where the only

survivors are robots). This is the horror that player correlation creates when the lines between self and game-self are blurred.

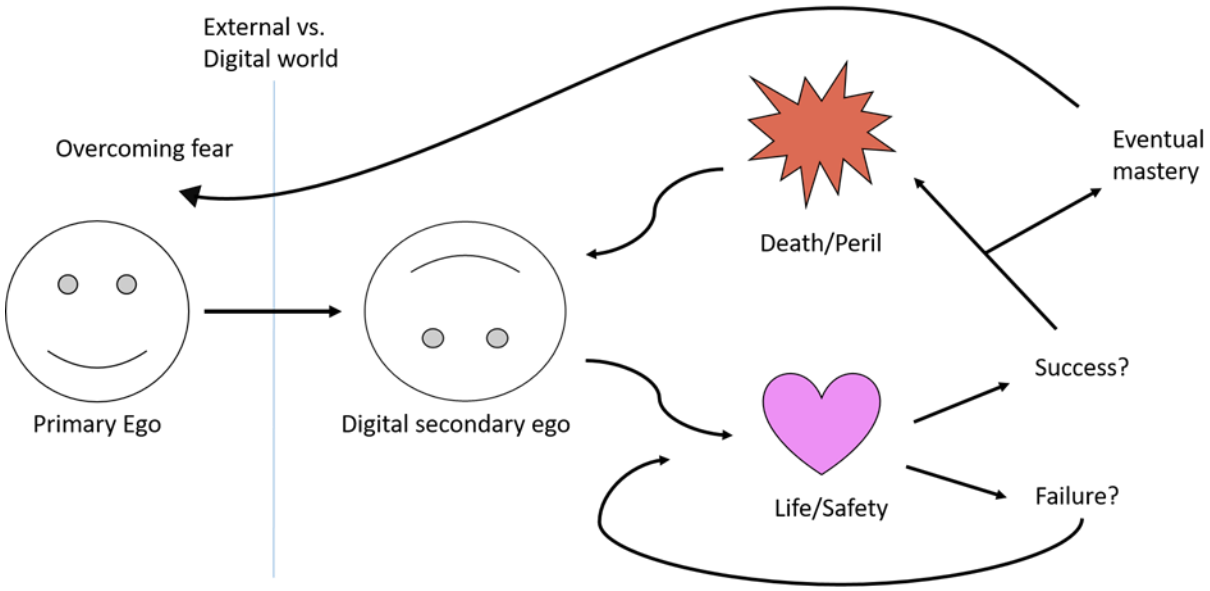
In horror games, there is already a discrepancy between who we are and who we are playing. We are invited, even encouraged, in many game genres to imagine ourselves as the hero, or protagonist of the story. Henry Jenkins' concept of "evocative spaces" argues that games rely on tropes to garner interest and play upon the player's fantasies. Familiar conventions include being the "chosen one" like in the RPG (role playing game) *Dragon's Dogma,* or having powers that no other character has, because you're "special," like the ability to have a heightened sense of awareness in *The Last of Us.* Horror reverses these familiar fantasies, by effectually pulling the rug out from under us. It encourages us to identify with the main character, as we have done so often in previous games, but then we are placed in a situation that reminds us of our own insignificance, and the artificial nature of attaching our identity to an avatar. There will always be a difference between the first self in the physical world, and the secondary self in the digital world. Horror games like *Soma* simply remind us of these differences that we are so ready to ignore.

So why do we play horror games? It has to do with our desire as players. There is not only the discrepancy between what is happening to the two selves (3D and digital) physically, but between their desires as well. As aforementioned, tension lies in the player desiring something, and the game preventing that desire from fully being realized. Sean Fenty writes that,

> A gap between our desire and that of the character opens and closes, forming a sort of dialogue across psychological states. A dual narrative results: given a sense of "our" progress as protagonist, we also construct a sense of our own embedded reactions. This can give rise to friction between the narratives...In a structurally similar sense, you exist

> in dual-track time as well: that of what the game represents (night falling after a zombie attack) and that of realworld play (mouse clicking, pause button selected then released). 29 Those dual consciousnesses, that character development arc, happen largely offscreen, in the player 's body and mind, (Fenty 101).

The "friction" between narratives is Jung's Shadow at work, as there is a gap between what the first self wants, and what the second self desires. The first self craves safety and normalcy. It seeks horror games because, in the end, they make the first self feel empowered. Portnow claims, "Much of modern horror is actually created to make us feel safe…In general you're supposed to leave the experience aware of how comfortably safe your real world is," (2014). However, the digital secondary self desires to put itself in danger, for some reason or another. In *Outlast,* the protagonist is a reporter who breaks into the asylum in search of a good story. In *Resident Evil 7*, the protagonist receives a call from his long-lost wife, which prompts him to seek her out in a cursed, old house in Louisiana. As the first self places the second self in danger to feel safety, which could be felt by not playing the game altogether, a feedback loop is created.



The physical self puts the digital self in danger for the sake of "eventual mastery," but also because in horror games, the player may be playing retrospectively. Roland Barthes, in his chapter on Freud's Master Plot, writes,

> Why does the child repeat an unpleasurable experience? It may be answered that by staging his mother's disappearance and return, the child is compensating for his instinctual renunciation. …the repetition of traumatic experiences in the dreams of neurotics can be seen to have the function of seeking retrospectively to master the flood of stimuli….(100).

Barthes claims that a sense of beginning implies a sense of the end, (94). It is possible, then, to live one's life retrospectively, as if to say, "I am behaving this way because that is how I want to be remembered when I die." It is living as if already dead. Likewise, players may seek horror games because the repetition of the "unpleasurable experience" sets the stage for defeating the horror, anticipating the feeling of power or safety that comes with the mastery of the game. Other games may invoke pleasure, or pride, or satisfaction upon completion, but horror games invoke comfort.

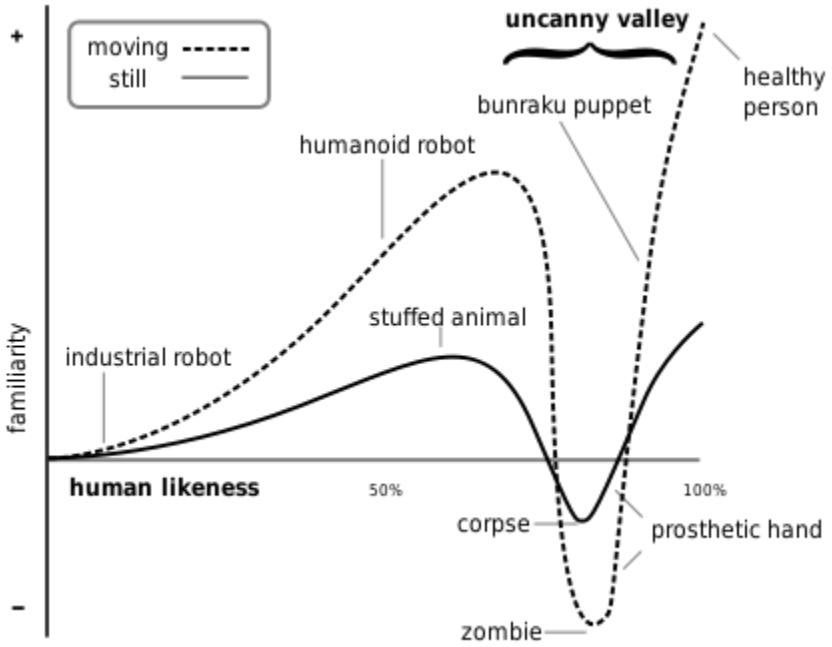
The physical self may also attempt to satisfy the desire for disconnecting from the self and connecting to a different, possibly better self. This is the same kind of fantasy actualization sought out in First Person Shooters (FPS) like *Bioshock* and Role Playing Games (RPGs) like *Skyrim,* where the player is the hero of the story and works to overcome obstacles with an entourage of virtual characters. There is often a sense of progression—a building of skills, armor, weapons, abilities and so forth to achieve these goals. (Of course, not all videogames feature the player in such a fantasized role, but many do, particularly in the FPS and RPG genres.) Because

the digital self resists the efforts of the physical self to fulfill this fantasy, the self is colliding with the self in an attempt to at one time perservere and die.

One possible reason for the clashing of selves in horror games is the paradox of the "safe danger." Similar to the idea of committing crimes in *Grand Theft Auto* without *actually* committing them in the physical world, the "safe danger" refers to peril that does not put the player in peril. Many gamers have related the pleasure of the safe danger to the pleasure of roller coasters, as the illusion of danger provokes a satisfying rush of adrenaline. However, the comparison is not quite equal. In riding a roller coaster, the consumer is passive; whereas in playing a horror game, the consumer is active. Moreover, some horror games are quite difficult to beat, and require many hours of repeating the same game mechanics. For instance, in playing the survival horror game *Outlast*, there are some difficult sections that may require several attempts to complete. Let us say that the player has difficulty completing a stealth section, or a section where he must sneak around and avoid hostile enemies. This part may be frightening for the first two attempts, but after the fourth or fifth attempt, the gameplay would become tedious and the horror game would temporarily cease to be scary. Since the act of watching a horror movie or riding a rollercoaster is less physically interactive, the pleasure of the adrenaline rush is not dependent upon player skill or persistence. For a horror game, the player's skill or ability to "win" the game directly correlates to the pleasure of the safe danger and the continuation of the horror game's narrative. Using *Outlast* as an example, if the player were unable to conquer the "stealth" section of the game, then he would be unable to experience the remainder of the story and thus unable to have the rush of adrenaline.

The last way that player correlation creates horror is explained by Freud's notion of the Uncanny. Freud, in his essay on the Uncanny, writes that, "The uncanny is that species of the

frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar," (124). The Uncanny may be best described as either something that is almost human, but not quite, or something that once was familiar but is now different. Wax figures, stuffed bears with teeth, men missing faces, hair loss, etc. are types of the Uncanny, as they resemble something we know, but at the same time, they resemble something alien to us. In terms of player correlation, the Uncanny resembles ourselves, but different. It makes us reflect on what makes us human, and something else inhuman. Portnow explains that "The Uncanny can tell the player something subtle about the world," and that it can make players say, "There's something wrong with this room," and search for whatever that might be (2013). The Uncanny Valley, which is, "Used in reference to the phenomenon whereby a humanoid robot or computer-generated figure bearing a close but imperfect resemblance to a human being arouses a sense of unease or revulsion in a person viewing," can be fairly easy to fall into (OED). Below is a diagram of the Uncanny Valley. As the object gets more human qualities, it also has a greater tendency to be Uncanny.



If the developers are creating a non-horror game, they should aim for either the first peak or the second (Portnow 2014). The first peak constitutes cartoonish characters that are given only some human characteristics, which makes them endearing. Mario, Kirby, Pikachu, and so on fall on this peak. Realistic looking characters like Joel from *The Last of Us* fall on the second peak, as they are believable enough that we liken them to ourselves.

Given this, if the developers are creating a horror game, they *should* aim for the Uncanny Valley. Instead of making monsters highly realistic (as they are in big budget games like *Resident Evil 7*) and showing quite a lot of the monster, it might be more effective to rely on the character's doubts, and by extension, the player's. By the time players are asking themselves, "Is that thing a little off-looking?" that thing should be gone, leaving the player to ruminate in their own paranoia.

The self, double self, Shadow, and Uncanny are all concepts for the developers to play with, and which they should play with. Packing a game with scary moment after moment ruins the tension and release cycle (as it did in the game *Outlast*), for it prevents tension from building and doubt from settling in.

The last ways in which narrative functions in a game work in conjunction with each other: choice, consequence, and reward. Choice is the maneuverability that developers create for their players—the level of interactivity and the paths of exploration and possible ways to experience or encounter the narrative. Consequence is what John Bain refers to as the "fail state," of the game that results from making some choices and not others. Rewards are the positive benefits of making some choices over others. There are two types of rewards: extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic rewards are those that exist apart from the activity that the player engages in. In *Bioshock: Infinite,* the extrinsic reward might be the little bits of story that are presented to the player after clearing an area. Unfortunately, the player would then have to dredge through the simulation in order to attain what they want. (Recall *Story of Seasons*, in which the game forced players to grind through tens of hours of simulation, only to be rewarded with a small piece of the story or a new character interaction.) Intrinsic rewards exist within the nature of the activity itself. James Portnow suggests that, as players, we should ask ourselves, "Am I doing the activity for the activity itself, or for some other reason?" (Portnow 2014). If the player has to suffer through any part of the game to enjoy another part, that reward is extrinsic. However, if the player enjoys the aspect of the game they are engaging in, it is intrinsic, since the nature of the activity itself is rewarding. The opening sequence in *The Last of Us* is a prime example of how choice, consequence, and rewards work in practice.

In the beginning of *The Last of Us,* the player controls a ten year old girl who wakes up in the middle of the night looking for her father. As the player wanders from room to room, the girl will remark about the scenery if examined, or call for her father, which allows the player to experience her distress as they play. In one room with a TV, the player may choose to stop and watch the news. If the player continues watching the TV, they will witness a reporter broadcasting in front of a hospital where an illness has broken out. Then, there will be word of an explosion, and if the player looks to their left in time, they can see the hospital explode from the window. The player may also miss seeing the explosion, but hear it nonetheless. Or, if the player has left the room before the sequence ended, then they might hear the explosion, but it will be far more removed, and the next sequence of dialogue (the girl walking down the stairs calling, "Dad?") will begin.

The ability to experience these differences in narrative is choice. If the developers really wanted the player to witness that event, they might have made the sequence a cut scene in which the player only watches. However, they chose to allow narrative freedom, which made the scene seem more organic. Much of the opening is temporal, in that it is easy to miss certain dramatic events if the player isn't looking in that direction. (One instance is a group of people running from a burning building while on fire.) The consequence that is presented in the opening is that of "missing" something, or failing to see a sequence. Games need consequence if they wish to present a challenge and make the in-game rewards more meaningful. The consequence of being bitten by zombies called "Clickers" in *The Last of Us* is death, and having to redo that section. But, in successfully getting rid of Clickers, or sneaking around them, the player might feel a more heightened sense of reward, since the alternative (death) makes the action mean something. If the player isn't faced with the possibility of failure, it is difficult to make the rewards rewarding. However, the player must be given choices and avenues with which to pursue the reward, or at a certain point, the simulation might become frustrating or tedious. The goal is not to frustrate the player, but to challenge them, and overcoming that challenge should be rewarding.

Portnow claims that a game should always attempt to reward intrinsically, so that every action the player undertakes is rewarding and meaningful (2013). This is especially true in horror games. As soon as a player stops playing the game for the individual actions, and instead grinds through sections to achieve an extrinsic reward, the game fails to be scary. Horror relies on the player being uncomfortably, unbearably present in a place or situation that they don't want to be in. If the player is only drudging through, it is difficult for them to feel vulnerable.

The best horror games will have a sense of vague consequence that builds as the tension does. They will incorporate the five elements of resource management, parallelism, choice, consequence, and intrinsic rewards to make each element of the game meaningful, and provide avenues where the player can be filled with self-doubt, where they feel like they don't know what the evil is anymore (is it me?), and they no longer trust their own senses. The best horror games will create rich tension that changes the way the player sees the world, or even themselves.

Ironically, John Carmack may not have promoted a specific "story" for *Doom* but the game, at least the 2016 version, has a strong connection to horror narrative. The landscape of Mars, which is riddled with ripped-apart bodies and destroyed lab equipment, the enemies, which are all manner of horrible demons, and even the high-tech armor system the player wears are all part of the narrative of fighting off an invasion from hell. It would be difficult to detach the act of fighting of demons (the simulation) from the demons' appearance or the landscape they are fighting in (narrative). Carmack didn't understand that narrative is deeply embedded in games. Every line of dialogue, every enemy, every rock and tree and crevice is tied to narrative. Let us not reduce games to a porn flick, or a simulation, or even a vehicle for storytelling. Let us embrace videogames for all their contradictory complexity and their ability to let us not just watch or listen or read, but experience and interact. And finally, let us embrace horror games, for poking at the psyche of its human players, for forcing them to go tumbling into the Uncanny Valley, for asking them again and again, "*Are you sure the only you is you? Why don't you find out?"*

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